

WILLIAM WILLIS.

[To accompany bill H. R. No. 530.]

JULY 21, 1842.

Mr. MATHIOT, from the Committee on Revolutionary Pensions, submitted the following

REPORT:

The Committee on Revolutionary Pensions, to whom was referred the memorial of William Willis, of the county of Monroe and Commonwealth of Virginia, beg leave to report :

That the petitioner now receives a pension of \$41 99 cents per annum, for services rendered by him during the war of the Revolution ; he claims, however, that he served for five years, by land and by sea, during our revolutionary struggle. The nature, extent, and value of his services, will more fully appear from the following memorial :

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress assembled :

Your petitioner respectfully represents that he is a native of that part of the State of Massachusetts where the town of New Bedford now stands, and where he passed his boyhood with his parents, until the revolutionary war began, excepting about two years that he passed in Boston and its vicinity, where he was a witness to some of the exciting scenes that hastened on that dread event ; the most afflicting of which was the massacre in Boston, on the 5th of March, 1770. And he was still in his boyhood, on the 19th of April, 1775, when the harsh sounds of the first battle of the war of the Revolution reached his ears, and were soon followed by the heart rending tidings that patriot blood, fresh from the veins of the wounded and the dying, was then flowing on the ground ; and it was with a mind filled with agonizing grief and bitter resentment that your petitioner then buckled on to his stripling frame his armor for war.

He had, from his early boyhood, been training for such an event, and passed over three years of the first part of the war in the vicinity of Boston, and in his native town and its vicinity ; part of the time under enlistment as a soldier, but more frequently as a volunteer, without pay or rations ; and he often had harder service as a volunteer than when he was enlisted. When he was a volunteer he was frequently obliged to stand sentinel the whole of a long stormy night, without being relieved, or having any means for shelter.

In the summer of 1778, your petitioner assisted in making preparation for the invasion of Rhode Island, and in landing the American forces upon

that island, and in removing them off when they retreated, and in performing various military duties during the whole time of the invasion; and, after the abandonment of the invasion, he assisted in conveying the war-like stores to Providence; after this, he served a short time a few miles to the southward of that place, where an attack from the enemy was expected; but, instead of landing in that quarter, an attack was made on New Bedford, the native town of your petitioner, when the shipping and most of the houses and stores were burnt.

The frequent hard service and exposure that your petitioner had encountered for more than three years had impaired his health so much as to make it necessary for him to give over active service by land; and, having no opportunity for engaging in a national vessel, he engaged uniformly through the war in private armed vessels. In that employment he is confident that he was of more service to our nation than he could have been by actual service in the army during the whole war, as it presented to him opportunities of aiding in the capture of many enemies' vessels, and also of saving many American vessels from being captured; and, likewise, in protecting parts of the sea coast of our country from depredation.

These services were too numerous to detail and describe. Your petitioner will therefore mention but few of them. He was one summer and fall with Captain Decatur, the father of the celebrated Commodore Decatur, in an armed vessel cruising between the capes of Delaware and Sandy Hook, for the purpose of intercepting vessels bound to or from New York; in which cruise we captured several vessels; among which, was a large English transport ship, with part of a regiment of Hessian troops, with their colonel on board. There were three or four to one on board the transport, when compared, in numbers with the captors. Had your petitioner been in the army during the whole war, it is not likely that he could have been instrumental in capturing so great a proportion of the enemy; they were veteran troops, and would have been in New York in a few hours if they had not been captured.

After the return of your petitioner to Philadelphia from this cruise, his health made it necessary for him to seek a warm climate, and he engaged on board the brig Holker for a cruise among the West India islands, where we were so fortunate as to capture a fine Virginia built English privateer, of twelve guns, and she proved to be a very swift sailer. She could not have been captured by the Holker if she had not been decoyed alongside of her by hiding the most of her men and guns; and, after being captured in that way, she proved to be the swiftest sailer. She was pierced for sixteen guns, and, by her swift sailing, would have been one of the greatest depredators on our commerce in the West Indies, if she had not been captured.

A prize master was put on board of the prize, and ordered to proceed to Quadaloupe. Your petitioner was also put on board, but without any particular charge or power to control the prize master, who ran the prize under the guns of the principal fort at Montserat, an English island, and went on shore in the boat with the best hands; in a few minutes after, it became nearly calm; the sails were down, but no anchor had been let go; and when the boat had got very near the shore, we were hailed from the fort, and ordered to let go an anchor, which your petitioner paid no other attention to than taking a trumpet and using the following words, "what do you say?" But, after repeating the same orders several times without

receiving any other kind of answer, they fired a number of shots, which did less damage than was expected. After several repetitions of this course of proceeding, they began to man a small armed vessel that was close to the fort, and put about fifty soldiers and other armed men on board, who began to fit her with oars.

This was a moment of deep anxiety to your petitioner; he found that, within half an hour, it must be decided whether that fine vessel would become an immediate annoyance to our unprotected commerce in the West Indies, or be rescued from the enemy's impending grasp. And the means for this rescue were your petitioner and four other youths. But they were active and obedient; they voluntarily put themselves under his direction, and, by night and by day, did whatever he desired them to do. But he depended more upon Providence for aid than upon human wisdom or activity. A squall was forming upon the side of the island above the fort, and appeared to be approaching us rapidly, and struck the water between us and the shore a few minutes after the small armed vessel had set off to board us. The young men were properly placed, and the moment the squall reached us, he gave orders to hoist the sails, but they had scarcely begun to rise before the main fort and two smaller ones opened their fire upon us, and, at the same time, the troops on board of the armed vessel that was sent off to board us, commenced firing at us; but our vessel moved so rapidly, that we were soon out of reach of annoyance by any of them.

After finding himself so quickly freed from the numerous dangers to which he had been but a few minutes before exposed, and after finding that neither of the youths that had assisted in rescuing the vessel from falling into English hands had been injured, and that the vessel did not appear to be greatly damaged, the mind of your petitioner was filled with grateful feelings to that good Providence that so signally aided and protected him, and those who were with him, in this arduous achievement. If the squall had been fifteen minutes later, the armed vessel, with the soldiers, would have been rowed along side, and escape would have been impossible, as the calm continued until the squall had reached us. Although we had thus escaped from a complication of difficulties and dangers, yet numerous others awaited us.

Very soon after we escaped from Montserat, our mainmast, that had not appeared to be greatly injured, began to show its weakness and fell overboard. Being then in a sea where British cruisers were seldom out of sight, and in what might be called a disabled vessel, with no legal papers on board—the prize master having taking them all on shore with him at Montserat—and there being no French island near but Guadaloupe, and that being to the windward of us, made it prudent to try to get to the island of St. Eustatia, to obtain attested papers to prove the character of our vessel, as she was exposed to be regarded as piratical, until she should have papers to prove the contrary.

Your petitioner could have reached the island of St. Eustatia in ten or twelve hours if there had been no dangers in the way. But it was through much danger and difficulty that he reached it in two days; and, on his arrival there, he was only permitted to remain long enough to enter a protest and obtain a certified copy of it. He could have sold the vessel for a good price at St. Eustatia, but she would have been employed immediately in capturing American vessels, as there was a large number then at anchor

in that place, and some of them ready to sail, and it was not uncommon for one or more of them to arrive every day; and, rather than to expose the commerce of his country and his countrymen to such an additional danger, he felt willing to encounter other difficulties and dangers, even if they should be as great as those he had already passed through.

Your petitioner had not much time to think; the Governor told him that the vessel was demanded by her owner, who lived on the island of St. Kitt's, only ten miles distant, and that she must sail away in one hour, or he must deliver her up. With this warning, although there were several armed vessels in sight, he set sail for the island of St. Thomas, and some of the armed vessels in sight gave chase after us, and cruising vessels were in chase of us during most of the passage; and when we entered the harbor of St. Thomas, a British frigate and two smaller British armed ships were nearly within gun shot of us. We had several narrow escapes on this passage, and some of them as signally providential as the escape from under the principal fort at Montserrat.

At St. Thomas your petitioner had the happiness of getting that fine vessel transferred to French merchants, and to see her manned by Frenchmen, by which means she was drawn from the list of the most dangerous of our enemies' cruising vessels, and added to the most effective of those of the allies of our nation.

Your petitioner believes that, by being thus instrumental, by the aid of Providence, in rescuing from the enemy a vessel so well fitted for injuring his country, by capturing its citizens and plundering them of their property, he was of more real service to his country than he could have been by serving in the army during the whole war.

Your petitioner never thought he had done enough for his country and countrymen, and continued following the seas in armed vessels until peace was established, although he was three times captured, one of those times was on his return from the West Indies, after having rescued that fine cruiser from the enemy's grasp and securing her in the hands of our nation's allies.

Your petitioner at that time had taken passage in a strongly armed merchant vessel, but a British ship of war came alongside of her in the night, and resistance would have been vain; he was then obliged to witness the horrors and suffer the miseries of a prisonship. After suffering all that human nature could bear, he was removed to a cartel ship, in a state of insensibility, and it was several months before his health was restored, but as soon as he was able he engaged again in armed vessels, several of which he commanded, and captured many of the enemy's vessels, and saved many American vessels from being captured.

The last armed vessel your petitioner commanded in the revolutionary war was the brig Dolphin, which vessel he fitted out at Edenton, in North Carolina; and, within forty-eight hours after sailing, he captured two richly loaded merchant vessels from Jamaica, bound to London, one of them 700 tons, and armed with 10 nine-pounders, and the other 300 tons, and armed with 8 six-pounders. In addition to capturing those valuable vessels, he succeeded in scattering the fleet, by alluring the principal convoying ships to give chase to him to so great a distance from the fleet that, by calms and storms, they became separated, which caused many of them to be captured.

Your petitioner continued cruising with the brig Dolphin until the war

ended, on the 3d day of April, 1783. He had been cruising for several weeks among the windward West India islands, but for a few of the past days he had been on the north side of Jamaica, where he had taken a small anchoring place called Brown's cove; one of the vessels found there he brought out and kept for a tender until the day the peace took place, when he restored her to the man she had belonged to, who appeared to be overjoyed almost to a degree of insanity; he said he had a family and the vessel was his only property. This man, whose name was Brown as well as the cove where he lived, assured your petitioner that the people of that place were as grateful for the treatment they had received as he could be, as the place, with their dwellings, had been captured and restored to them without injury or a demand for ransom.

And your petitioner has had the happiness of finding that the gratitude of the people of that place appeared to continue without abatement a long time, and that they made all the returns in their power, by acts of kindness to his countrymen, and were very serviceable to many of them, and several years after the peace Mr. Campbel, one of the principal inhabitants of that place, came to Kingston, where your petitioner then was, and invited him, in the name of the inhabitants, to visit them, and pass as long a time as he could with them, which he regretted he could not accept, as nothing could have been more interestingly gratifying to his feelings than to have revisited the people of that beautiful place, which he once visited in hostility, and, within two hours after, left with mutual good will, respect, and friendship.

It was always a particular object of your petitioner's care, while performing acts of war, to mingle with them as many acts of kindness as possible, and by adhering to that practice he received many grateful returns for those kindnesses to himself, and had the satisfaction of being informed of many more that had been bestowed upon his friends and countrymen, during the continuance of the revolutionary war, and since, by those who had been captured by him.

Your petitioner always regarded it as performing an additional service to his country, if, while he was weakening the enemy by capturing its subjects and their property, he could, by kind treatment of those subjects, excite in their bosoms friendly feelings towards his countrymen.

Your petitioner witnessed several instances of the beneficial effects to others of his humane treatment to prisoners, and in some instances shared in them himself; once in particular, at New Providence, where, upon his being carried in as a prisoner, he found several masters and supercargoes of vessels, who were not only treated with humanity, but with particular attention, in consequence of what was regarded there as great kindness, shown by your petitioner to some of the inhabitants of that island who had been made prisoners by him; on his arrival he received the particular thanks of the Governor, with many acts of kindness from him and from the inhabitants of that island.

From the number captured which your petitioner had an agency in making, it may be supposed by many that his gains were great, but such was not the case. His object was not gain, but to serve his country; and what little he at any time possessed was at the disposal of his country, and exhausted in relieving others.

Notwithstanding your petitioner was confident he had served more than two years in the land service, yet, as the greatest part of that time was as

a volunteer without pay or rations, and often in small numbers, and the people with whom he served being all dead except two, when he called at the war office on the 20th of May, 1833, he had no means of proving a claim for more than \$41 99, although he had passed more than five years on land and sea in defending his country and annoying its enemies; and the most of the time he was thus acting on the seas, it was in the station of first officer, or commander of armed vessels; and although it is not for your petitioner to estimate his own services, yet he firmly believes that he was of as much service to his country as he could have been had he served in the regular army more than two years of the first part of the war as a private soldier, and more than three years of the latter part of it as lieutenant or captain in the United States naval service.

No commander of a United States ship of war could have been more rigidly careful than your petitioner was to enforce the most strict discipline among his officers and men, and to prevent any acts being committed by those under his command that were inconsistent with the most humane rules of modern warfare; and his care was extended to the humane and civil treatment of the common sailor, as well as to the officer and private gentleman: and although large numbers of sailors were captured by him, he never confined one of them in irons, nor ever suffered any but civil language to be made use of to them, nor any abusive epithets against their country to be made use of while there were any prisoners on board. And your petitioner has had satisfactory evidence that this line of conduct was the most beneficial, both to his country and countrymen, of any he could have chosen. In confirmation of the pleasing effects that were the result of his kind treatment to prisoners, he will only relate one more circumstance:

On your petitioner's return to Edenton, North Carolina, after the peace, a gentleman was introduced to him by Josiah Collins, Esq.; the gentleman then informed him that he had wished for the introduction to thank him for benefits he had experienced from gentlemen who had been prisoners to your petitioner, and had been recaptured in a prize by a British ship of war and sent into St. Augustine, where this gentleman was then a prisoner with a number of other Americans; and he also informed your petitioner that as soon as those gentlemen arrived they obtained more kind treatment to the Americans that were then prisoners there; and he also informed your petitioner that they all expressed a wish that he should be particularly informed that their prompt kindness to his countrymen was to make the best return that it was then in their power to make for his friendly treatment to them while they were his prisoners.

Your petitioner respectfully prays your honorable bodies to take the subject of the foregoing into consideration, and to add to his pension whatever you may judge to be proper. Your petitioner is upwards of eighty years of age, and is afflicted with deafness, and also with a vertigo, which incapacitates him for any regular business; and it is not likely that, with his age and infirmities, he can long remain here. But he will be grateful to his country, and to your honorable bodies, for whatever you may think proper to allow him as long as it may please the Almighty to preserve his life.

WILLIAM WILLIS.

The testimony filed in the case shows that the petitioner entered the

service of his country very early in the Revolution, and was engaged, either on the land or sea, during most of the war. The committee are satisfied, from an examination of all the papers, that the services of the petitioner entitle him to a full pension as a private, under the act of June 7, 1832. They therefore report a bill granting him, in addition to what he already receives, a pension for the sum of \$38 01 per annum, during his natural life, to commence on the 4th day of March, 1831.

